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PRESS RELEASE

Heinrich Zille: Old-Time Berlin

The most beautiful photographs by Heinrich Zille of the late 19th and early 20th-century Berlin

Heinrich Zille (1858–1929) enjoys great popularity as a humorous commentator and illustrator of Berlin's working-class milieu at the dawn of the 20th century and is highly revered in Germany. Not only did he capture life in Berlin with pen and pencil, but with a camera as well.

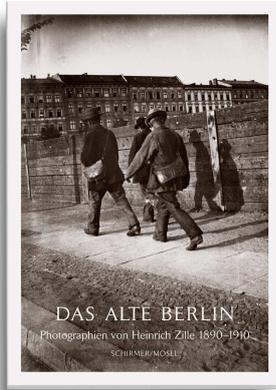
As a trained lithographer he possessed the necessary technical know-how, and as an observer he was as avid as he was precise, perceiving with his eyes – and camera – things that the fleeting eye preferred to overlook or obscure: the conditions in Berlin's poorer quarters, back courtyards, wooden fences and trash dumps, the gin mill on the corner, children playing in the mud, the latrines at the fairgrounds, and scenarios of urban transition. Nowhere does one find the opulent buildings so characteristic of Wilhelminian Berlin – exceptions prove the rule – nor the so-called picturesque corners of the booming metropolis.

Zille was the first “street photographer” and thus the originator of a photographic genre that is still very much alive today. Yet it was not just his unusual choice of photographic topics that earned him a place of honor in the universal history of photography: his way of handling the camera itself is also worthy of note. As early as 1890, long before the necessary technical prerequisites had come into being, he set his camera and his shooting technique into physical motion. He circled his motifs – usually people in motion – like a photojournalist (long before the term even existed), captured them in series and, unnoticed by his models, took documentary images of people who were unaccustomed to striking a pose. One could almost speak of a cinematic use of the still camera by Zille – of a revolution of the photographic process in the truest sense of the word.

Thanks to the systematic compilation of Zille's photographs by Winfried Ranke and his book *Heinrich Zille - Photographien Berlin 1890-1910*, which was published by Schirmer/Mosel in 1975, Zille was introduced to a broad public and given the credit he deserves as a pioneer of socio-documentary photography.

In 1985 Thomas Struth prepared a set of black and white prints from Zille's glass negatives. These new prints not only bear witness to the interpretive skill of Thomas Struth, but to the condition of the negatives and photochemical capabilities in 1985 as well, and we chose them to illustrate the new Zille book about turn-of-century Berlin.

Jeff Wall and Roy Arden – both famous contemporary photographers in their own right – and Wolfgang Kemp comment, classify, and evaluate the aesthetic of Zille's photographs from today's perspective, making this a “Berlin book” in which the historical eye and its contemporary perception intercross in a most unique manner.



Old-Time Berlin
Photographs by Heinrich Zille
1890–1910
With texts by
Jeff Wall & Roy Arden,
and Wolfgang Kemp
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16 illustrations
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